

# 2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

## It's all meaningless

Presented by Leo Douma

### Introduction

I want you to imagine you are from another planet, and that you have come to learn about human life. The only input is that you just observe what goes on. You watch how some people work endlessly and others just hang around. There are those who are very health conscious and others are gluttons. You notice how some people are very rich and others desperately poor. You notice how some are extremely clever and others quite simple.

However you observe that despite all the differences among people, they all have something in common, they all end up the same, they all die. What conclusions would you draw from your observations? "It seems no matter what you do, you all die, so what's the point of it all?" That's the issue of concern for many- is everything ultimately meaningless?

### Part 2

Do you ever wonder about the meaning of life? Well, there's a book in the Bible that ponders that very question. The book is entitled Ecclesiastes. The writer refers to himself as the professor or enquirer. This enquirer decides to observe life, to establish the point to it. He says he explored all the different forms of wisdom. He also experimented with hard work, and wealth. But he didn't just take the approach of the academic or businessman. He also tried the "wine, women and song." He says "*I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.*" (2:10)

He wrote in a time remarkably like ours. The people had lost interest in God. They were spiritually low. They had put lots of emphasis on their material possessions. And so after observing life, trying it all, he writes his conclusion to what he saw: "*Meaningless! Meaningless. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless.*" (1:2) He meant that everything is like vapour or breath. It's what you get breathing out on a crisp cold day. It is fleeting, brief, unreliable. It's like chewing on fairy floss when you wanted steak. There's no substance. So the professor stresses how little material possessions have to offer.

The problem was that the people were putting too much expectation on all their stuff, their earthly possessions. They thought they would be happy. But their expectations were not met. It was pointless, a vapour, nothing. So the professor asks: "*What does a man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun?*" This is the hardheaded question drawn from the business world. What do you actually get for all your work? What bang do you get for your buck? Jesus asked a similar question: "*What does it profit a man if he gains all this wealth but loses his soul?*" The answer: nothing, it's just a vapour, a bag full of wind. It's pointless.

The professor is not just pessimistic here. He is actually quite realistic. The Apostle James wrote in his letter "*Now listen, you who say 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, carry on business and make*

money.' Why you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a while and then vanishes." In other words, you are just a vapour. It's true isn't it? We battle like crazy to pay off our huge mortgages, to own our McMansion on our tiny block, we get all comfortable with all the stuff we put in the house, and just when we think it's time to relax, problems knock us for a six, we get sick, and we die. Does this sound depressing, sure, but the professor in Ecclesiastes is going somewhere with this. Have the courage to hear him out.

### Part 3

What the writer of Ecclesiastes does is to dare us to look at the consequences of a certain view of life. Twenty five times he writes in his book the phrase "*under the sun*". Each time it occurs the professor is saying: "Let's assume for the sake of the argument, that there is no God. Let's assume life is only that which is under the sun, that there is nothing above. It's just us on this earth and there is no heaven or God. It's just us struggling on this earth, as it flies around in the vast empty space of the universe."

In other words, for a very old book it has a very modern approach. It's the belief of many an Australian today. And even if many say they are not atheists, but reckon there is a god of sorts, many are practical atheists. That is, we have basically ignored God for years, we live as if He disappeared long ago.

Now what our learned teacher does in Ecclesiastes is he dares to ask the most private thoughts in the minds of his readers. He takes them further than they would care to go and shows them the logical consequences of their lifestyles. Be radical, forget God, do away with Him. Instead live for your possessions and pleasures. But where does it leave you? Life is pointless. If we dare to be honest with ourselves, we realise that the writer is right.

This is a conclusion we have come to ourselves but would never dare say so out loud. We work and scrap for our houses and spend lots of money on things, and enjoy what we can for all its worth, because that's all there is. A dominant philosophy of last century summed it all up when it said: life is about finding meaning in meaninglessness. The young in particular can suffer from this spirit of our age. They have been brought up under the threat of nuclear war, and now terrorism. They can see the destruction of the environment. They see the unhappiness of their parents with their broken families. They see the hypocrisy of government and other institutions. They have seen their elders have long wet lunches and return to work inebriated so why can't they take their drugs to find happiness in their perceived meaningless existence.

It's not a pretty picture we are painting, but honesty says it's a real one. This is the logical conclusion of living without God. Is this what you really want in life, meaninglessness. Or is there another way?

### Part 4

What we have said so far all seems rather depressing doesn't it? Well it is. And that is precisely the point. By daring to show the result of life lived "*under the sun*", without God, the writer of Ecclesiastes is actually encouraging us to look elsewhere. If you don't think you have a problem, you won't change. If you have buried this horrible conclusion by working and living as hard as you can, you won't face the issue. But if you realise that the direction of your life is meaningless, you're more likely to sit up and listen to the alternative.

That's what the writer of Ecclesiastes is doing. He gives a remarkable apologetic to show the need for God in our lives. He goes all the way down every alley of the lifestyle without God. He tries all kinds of ideas and wisdom without God, and finds them terribly wanting. He tries all the good stuff in life, but leaves God out

and finds it all sadly empty and pointless. When we are ready to admit that, we are then ready to hear the good news. Life is not pointless. We have made it such for ourselves by ignoring him who has created life and gives it value and direction, who guides all of life to a glorious climax.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Martin Luther helped bring about the Reformation. His big struggle was how could he a sinner get right with God. He found the answer again in the Bible as it speaks of God's grace. It speaks of the forgiveness we can have when we believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again, that he dealt with our failure towards God.

These days people reckon they don't have that same struggle Luther had. Why, well they have ignored God. So if there is no God, who worries about sin, about rebelling against God and failing his ways. But we in our time struggle with the point to our existence, with purpose and meaning. Do we understand that that it is the same struggle as Luther had? So much seems so pointless because we have lost connection with God. We need again to get right with him and relate with him a deep and meaningful way.

That is what God offers to us through Jesus Christ. Because when we are in a loving relationship with God, we discover the real values of life, we know that whatever happens is God working for our good, and that death is not the end. In God we understand the wonder and the meaning to life.

### **Conclusion**

I trust the courageous study and diagnosis of the professor in Ecclesiastes has made you aware of why life can seem so meaningless despite our wealth and all the good things we have. If it's been your experience that you have been struggling to see the point to life, why not come to God today.

*God I have it all, yet life seems so pointless. I now realize it's because I have ignored you and wanted to live without you. But I see now that you are life, that you are its meaning. Please forgive me. I accept what Jesus did through his death and resurrection as making up for all my failure. Please accept me home as your child, loved and having been shown life, real life.  
Amen.*